Miranda
Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone / Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

11 | 2015
Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture / Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British Literature and Culture

Introduction

Wendy Harding and Gretchen Murphy

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6918
DOI: 10.4000/miranda.6918
ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher
Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference
Wendy Harding and Gretchen Murphy, "Introduction", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 17 July 2015, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/6918 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.6918

Introduction

Wendy Harding and Gretchen Murphy

1 In their long history of displacing the indigenous peoples and settling on their lands, Euroamericans have paired the project of radically transforming the environment with the apparently contradictory work of stabilizing it in cultural representations. Both are means for a nation of immigrants to appropriate the land and to inhabit it. The essays collected in this special issue of *Miranda* explore some of the directions this project has taken in the realm of cultural production. We take as a departure point a remark William Carlos Williams makes in a letter about his long poem *Paterson*. Turning his attention to a hitherto un-represented New Jersey town offers a means of renewing American culture through : "an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression" (286). Williams's hesitant declaration, with its assertions and retractions, hints at a measure of incompatibility between his experience of his surroundings and the language available to convey it and also at a locale that seems to be cut off from expression, incapable of speaking for itself. The poem as artwork would lift the land to expression, that is at the same time raise it to a superior status and also force it to comply with the restrictive format of discourse. Hence possibly the poet's apprehension and tentativeness. Williams's reflection offers a point of departure for investigating the problematic nature of any expression of environment. His consideration of the question is more pertinent in voicing the problems involved than in offering solutions.

2 In part Williams's difficulty comes from the ideological heritage that privileges cultural productions over material realities. The critical precepts of his time assumed that poetry gave form to something formless and lent a voice to something that has no means of expression. In this model "an environment" is distinct from a human subject; it is mute, inert matter that has to be acted on, "lifted to expression." The poet's role would be to raise matter from its lowly state, to exalt it and at the same time reveal it, as if lifting a veil. The poet would be a demiurge, bringing order to chaos, making "a new and total culture" out of nature. Nonetheless, Williams considers the cultural resources available for the task to be deficient, "broken," and the "experiment"

doomed to failure. He is aiming at a new relationship, one that gives a language to concrete reality: “no ideas but in things.”

3 At the time Williams was writing, the term “environment” mainly evoked the social and cultural conditions affecting an individual, whereas it now tends more frequently to denote the natural world on which human actions have an impact. Both senses suggest interaction, but like any term that points to realities beyond the restricted focus of the individual, “environment” evokes the nature-culture split contested by contemporary theorists like Donna Haraway, who now insistently speaks of “naturecultures.” The more-than-human world has its cultures. Rather than being silent or inert, it resonates with sounds, movements, and actions. Yet those manifold voices and inscriptions may be inaudible or hidden from view. The artist’s role would then be to orchestrate or organize the concert of voices and images seized (or lifted in the sense of stolen) from the environment. Cultural production can be a means of affirming one’s belonging in the world, a form of habitation, yet, as Foucault insists, cultural production entails an assertion of power; inhabitation involves appropriation and exclusion.

4 The articles collected in ‘Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican culture” construe the study of environment broadly to include not just eco-critical concerns in literature, but also interdisciplinary inquiries into how writers and artists represent places. Thus the six essays included discuss the significance of place in a range of cultural practices such as photography, music, poetry, genre fiction, and advertising. Four of the six focus on the American West, which attracts this focus because it has been the terrain for a range of formative conflicts and cultural formations in United States history, including those over colonialism, land use, technology, labor, and regional identity. But these essays are also concerned more generally with how we can represent and know a place. What limits, shapes or enables our ability to raise the environment to expression? These essays explore such efforts and track how they have been received and re-signified by audiences and by subsequent generations of artists and writers.

5 In “Eclipsing Aestheticism: Western Landscape Photography after Ansel Adams,” Kelly Dennis situates Ansel Adams in a tradition that reveals the political stakes of his seemingly apolitical, aestheticized landscapes. By looking backward to Adams’s inspirations in late 19th century surveying and topographical photography, and forward to postmodern and early twenty-first-century references to Adams’s iconic images, Dennis reveals the on-going political and environmental stakes in picturing the American West.

6 While Dennis tracks vying interests through intertextuality and adaption in Adams’s legacy, Nancy Cook’s study of a single ranch in South Texas teases out similar conflicting interests as they are contained and interwoven in the ranch’s public image. Cook’s “Preserving Home and Revising History: Legacies of the King Ranch of Texas” takes King Ranch’s website as its primary object of analysis. Cook is most interested in how the website creates continuity among distinct and contested strands of discourse. Narratives of a mythic “Old West,” with its appeals to family and tradition, sit uneasily beside discourses of modern agribusiness on the one hand and the ideal of sustainable farming on the other. Cook criticizes the ranch's attempt to craft a coherent and appealing public image by concealing contradictions between these narratives, and she points to an alternate history of conflict over labor and land-use in American ranching.

7 Gesa Mackenthun's "Hidden Cities in the American Wilderness : The Cultural Work of a Romantic Trope" focuses on colonial conflicts in depictions of western spaces, expanding her historical and geographic frame to identify a colonial tradition extending from the present back to Euroamerican settlement in the New World. This tradition is the imperial trope of the lost pre-Columbian city. The trope expresses divergent impulses of Euroamerican colonial texts. While colonial discourse finds in the mysterious ruined cities a desire to possess and dispossess fueled by their emphatically abandoned state, such spaces are also repositories for imperial anxieties, and thus become settings for a kind of return of the repressed of colonial aggression and violence in adventure horror genre fiction. As in Dennis's study of Adams's photography, Mackenthun looks critically at the aestheticization of these seemingly empty western spaces, considering in texts ranging from Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) to Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1988) to the contemporary archaeology thriller *Thunderhead* (1999) the imperial desire to depopulate and dehistoricize American landscapes.

8 Audrey Goodman also discusses Willa Cather's fiction, but rather than focusing on the author's participation in colonial tropes, Goodman is interested in the conflicting interests of Cather's *Song of the Lark* (1915). Goodman argues that the novel pits a singular and universal idea of art against a commitment to the difference that local and personal memories can make in receiving or creating art, a conflict that remains productively unresolved throughout the text. According to Goodman, technologies of sound recording are an important historical context for this aesthetic debate. On the one hand, recording technology in the novel enables the protagonist's trained voice to communicate across cultural and class divides as a kind of transcendent, universal art. Yet on the other hand, anthropologists were also using this technology to capture local dialects, songs, and soundscapes. Goodman takes this later capability as analogous to the novel itself, which she describes as a kind of recording device for immigrant voices, folk music, and natural sounds that are documented and catalogued without hierarchy and subordination. Thus for Goodman, as in Dennis's account of Adams's legacy in photography, the capability of changing technologies to alter artistic conditions and capture different realities offers a thematic and formal lens as well as an important historical and material condition for representing environment.

9 The last two essays in the collection move away from the American West to more general considerations about the limitations and possibilities of representing nature. Brad Tabas's "Dark Places : Ecology, Place, and the Metaphysics of Horror Fiction" identifies a tradition in horror fiction that uses setting to channel anxieties about what can and cannot be known and controlled through instrumental knowledge. Tabas's essay culminates with a discussion of Jeff Vandemeer's novel 2010 *Annihilation*, which is a lost city fiction – a self-referential archeological thriller using the imperial trope that Mackenthun identifies. But Tabas's central concern is not how such novels express colonial power, but how they productively invite meditation on the limits of our knowledge, especially concerning nature and ecology. Tabas places *Annihilation* in a tradition of "weird realism" traced back through H.P Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe in order to identify these stories' generic potential to promote reflection on the gap that exists between the perceived world and a "weird reality" that completely escapes our senses and our ability to know nature. In this way, Tabas argues that horror fiction is in

many ways more realist than other forms of writing, and of great importance to ecocritical projects.

10 Yves-Charles Grandjeat also takes as his premise the principle that nature lies outside of the medium of ordinary human perception and representation, but then he asks if poetry has the ability to breach this divide and seeks to understand the routes that poets take to try to achieve this. Grounding his analysis in ecocriticism, Grandjeat identifies as the goal of such poetry not objective knowledge of nature, but a kind of co-operation with nature that turns the latter into a subject rather than an object of the discourse. Through formal analysis, Grandjeat explores how contemporary American poets including Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams and Gary Snyder attempt a poetic co-operation with nature. Of special interest is these poets' use of ritual conversion as a formal, thematic and material element. Such rituals begin by performing a sacrifice of the individual, sovereign, figure of the Western self, which releases the rhythmic materiality of language, discourse and narrative form from the strictures of the self to open them up to life at large. Like some of the contemporary landscape photographers who Dennis describes resignifying and detaching themselves from the genre's instrumentalist or aestheticizing traditions, these poets explore and extend the limits of representation in their medium, and they do so by seeking an ethical engagement with nature rather than ironizing its conditions of possibility. Environment is the Other that engages individuals in a relationship eliciting both responsiveness and responsibility. Representation thus involves more than giving form; it also implies the moral obligation to act on behalf of a third party.

11 This collection of essays confirms that far from being relegated to serving as a background to human action, place is a central subject in American representations. Moreover, rather than distinguishing cultural production from material practice in the work of shaping the environment, we have to conceive the two as inseparably linked. Finally, the essays gathered here continue the dialogue initiated by artists between human forms of expression and more-than-human environments, extending it into a critical forum and framing it within the contexts of imperialism and ecology.[1]

Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.

Williams, William Carlos. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams.* Ed. John C. Thirlwall. New York : New Directions, 1957.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank Hala Herbly for her help with copy editing. Thanks are also due to the anonymous peer reviewers who worked on this issue.

AUTHORS

WENDY HARDING

Professor
Université de Toulouse Jean Jaurès
harding@univ-tlse2.fr

GRETCHEN MURPHY

Professor
University of Texas at Austin
gretchen@austin.utexas.edu